

# Veggie Health for Kids

by Amanda Woodvine, nutritionist, the Vegetarian & Vegan Foundation



“Obesity in children an ‘epidemic’ screamed the headlines recently, reporting that more than a quarter of under 11s carry more fat than they should.

A frighteningly large number of children suffer ill health because of obesity, and not always from the kinds of diseases you’d expect to see in children.

Adult diseases such as high blood pressure, raised cholesterol levels and type 2 diabetes are now appearing in younger and younger people and the problem is getting worse.

But are there any easy solutions? In his book, ‘Dr Spock’s Baby and Child Care’, paediatrician Dr Benjamin Spock reckoned the way to get children to lose weight is to change the type of food they eat rather than the amount. He encouraged shifting the entire family away from oily fried foods, meats and dairy products and toward low-fat, plant-based foods – grains, pasta, vegetables, pulses and fruit. When this is done, he said: “Weight loss typically occurs without anyone going hungry.”

## bulging in the USA

Obesity is particularly rife in the United States, where 45% of pre-teenage girls, and 20% of pre-teenage boys report having been on a diet, according to a national survey.

Echoing Dr Spock’s advice, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), a non-profit organisation promoting preventive medicine in the USA, says: “Instead of centring meals around fatty meats and cheese they should be built from healthy grains, legumes (pulses) and vegetables.”

PCRM bills these foods as the ‘New Four Food Groups’, and suggests that they benefit the entire family: “People who consume diets built from these foods tend to experience a much lower rate of

heart disease, cancer and stroke. And they can also bring weight problems, which contribute to a host of health problems, under control.”

Its website is packed with advice on teaching kids to eat well and keeping them moving, and even contains sample menus and healthy snack ideas. Bean burritos, pasta with marinara sauce, vegetable stir-fries and vegetable soup all prove a hit with children, it suggests. Check it out at: [www.kidsgethealthy.org/](http://www.kidsgethealthy.org/)

## kids get active

We all know that most of us don’t take as much exercise as we should, mostly because our jobs don’t require it. Information technology, the car, labour-saving devices, lifts, automatic doors, TV and computer games and warmer houses all play a part. And it’s much the same for children.

It’s obvious to say that more activity helps with weight control. People who exercise the most are the least likely to be obese. Just as importantly,

those who are the most physically active gain less weight as they get older than those who are sedentary.

The Chief Medical Officer recommends that young people get at least 60 minutes exercise every day. It should be at least moderately-intense, and should include bone-strengthening exercises at least twice a week such as walking, running and climbing.

As with adults, a pedometer is a great motivator and helps you keep score. Clipped to your waistband, it counts your steps and can measure the calories you’ve burnt off and the distance you’ve walked. To meet the exercise recommendations, girls should aim for at least 11,000 steps, and boys 13,000, on at least five days a week.



## green light to veggie diets

Some parents have reservations about whether their children would get enough nutrients on a plant-based diet. However, recent research in the *Journal of Paediatric Health Care* states that vegetarian children and teenagers consume more fruit, vegetables and fibre than their non-veggie counterparts. Vegetarian children are also leaner, says the report, take in less harmful cholesterol, saturated fat and total fat, and have less risk of developing several chronic diseases in adulthood.

So sound is the science that the authors encourage nurses to: “... reassure parents, children, and adolescents that a well-planned vegetarian diet is a healthy choice that promotes growth and decreases the risk for diabetes, heart disease and cancer.”

Protein needn’t be a cause for concern, either. Almost all foods – grains, pulses (peas, all types of beans, lentils), nuts, seeds and vegetables – contain protein. Especially good sources of high quality protein include soya products (eg tofu, soya milk, veggie mince), cereals (eg rice, pasta, wholemeal bread), pulses (eg baked beans, chickpeas, kidney beans, lentils), nuts and seeds.

To give you a comparison between some meat and vegetarian products, a standard 50g beef burger contains 10.2g of protein and three (90g) fish sticks 12.1 g; half a can of 225g baked beans contains 11.5g of protein; an average serving of pasta (190g cooked) contains 8.5g, an average serving of kidney beans (160g cooked) 12.4g, and a small packet (25g) of peanuts contains 6.1g.

Further information, advice and guidance, from the Vegetarian & Vegan Foundation, 8 York Court, Wilder Street, Bristol, BS2 8QH, Tel: 0117 970 5190 9am-6pm, Mon-Fri, or e-mail: [info@vegetarian.org.uk](mailto:info@vegetarian.org.uk). Also see its guide, *Veggie Health For Kids*, at [www.vegetarian.org.uk](http://www.vegetarian.org.uk) (available for £2.50 inc p&p).

## box clever!

Follow the VVF’s simple suggestions for improving your kids’ lunch.

Ditch the white bread and crisps and switch to wholemeal bread sandwiches, wraps or pitta bread pockets filled with:

- bean or mushroom paté
- smoked tofu
- nut butter (cashew, almond or peanut)
- hummus (chick pea dip)
- spicy kidney beans
- falafel (savory rissoles made from chick peas)
- avocado and walnut
- left-over nut loaf, sliced

These tasty fillings provide plenty of protein, ‘good’ fats, complex carbohydrates, B vitamins, vitamin E and minerals including calcium, zinc and iron – important for growth and development.

Boost the vitamin content by adding any of the following:

- shredded lettuce and other salad leaves such as rocket, baby spinach or watercress sliced cucumber
- sliced tomatoes
- grated carrot
- thinly sliced peppers
- coleslaw made with dairy-free mayonnaise (such as Plamil brand, available from special foods section in large supermarkets and health food shops)
- sweetcorn
- fresh parsley, coriander or chives

These additions provide fibre and antioxidant vitamins A, C and E that protect health and fight off illnesses and disease.

Other tasty snacks to boost the nutritional value include:

- Vegetable sticks: carrot, cucumber, celery, baby corn, pepper etc.
- A handful of cherry tomatoes
- Dried fruits: mini-boxes of raisins or packets of apricots
- Mixed unsalted nuts and seeds: cashews, almonds, Brazil nuts with sunflower and pumpkin seeds
- Fresh fruit: apple, orange, grapes, apricots, plums, pomegranate... be adventurous!

Drinks – it’s very important to keep your child’s fluid levels up – secondary schools in particular don’t always provide drinking fountains and sugary/fizzy drinks are a major contributor to weight gain and tooth decay. Water is best but home-made fruit smoothies or unsweetened fruit juice are good alternatives.

A nutritious meal will help your child concentrate and will establish life-long healthy eating habits that will protect them from disease both now and in adulthood.

